

Uterine fibroids: a silent epidemic

Contributed by Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-Ohio)
June 06, 2007

About seven years ago, one of my staffers approached me with an idea for a piece of legislation. He told me a story of one of his female friends who had been suffering from Uterine fibroids. Her condition had taken a tremendous toll on both her and her family, mainly because she was unsure of her options.

This young lady is not alone. There are many women across this country who are silently dealing with this painful, sometimes deadly disease. Uterine fibroids are non-cancerous tumors that form within a woman's uterine lining. It is estimated that three in every four American women have uterine fibroids, with one in four women seeking medical care for the condition. African American women are three to nine times more likely to develop uterine fibroids.

Uterine fibroids can be hard to combat given the fact that women are diagnosed with the disease at various stages and when they are in various physical conditions. While the fibroids may develop slowly in some women, others may develop more aggressively. Right now, hysterectomy is the most common treatment for uterine fibroids, accounting for 200,000, or 30 percent, of all hysterectomies in the United States. It is for this reason that I have reintroduced the Uterine Fibroid Research and Education Act to find new and better ways to treat or even cure uterine fibroids.

The Uterine Fibroid Research and Education Act would double federal funding for uterine fibroid research and fund a public education campaign on the condition. Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) introduced companion legislation in the Senate.

We introduced identical legislation in the 109th Congress, but neither received a floor vote.

Even though an estimated three quarters of all reproductive-age women have uterine fibroids, little is known about them and there are still few good treatment options available. Women deserve better, and Senator Mikulski and I have made it a priority to make sure women are not left out or left behind when it comes to their health.

This legislation will authorize \$30 million in federal funding for uterine fibroid research each year for five years, doubling the budget from last year's \$15 million. Research is needed to find out what causes uterine fibroids, why African American women are disproportionately affected and what can be done to prevent and treat the condition. In addition, this bill creates a program to educate doctors and their patients about uterine fibroids so that women get the information they need to make the best decisions regarding their health.

Fortunately, physicians have recommended useful tips for managing uterine fibroids:

Lose weight. Extra weight increases estrogen levels, and estrogen causes fibroids to grow. So get more exercise, trim calories, cut down on fat and eat a sensible breakfast everyday.

Harness your hormones. Estrogen levels increase during pregnancy. Birth control pills also contain estrogen, which is why pregnant women and women on birth control pills find that their fibroids grow quickly. Talk to your doctor about how your hormones might be at risk.

Know your family history. Fibroids are hereditary. You stand a good chance of getting fibroids if your mother, grandmother or sister had them. Discuss your family history with your doctor.

Heed early warnings. Know the warning signs of fibroids and seek treatment. Common fibroid symptoms include extremely heavy menstrual bleeding, abdominal swelling, abdominal pressure, cramps, painful intercourse and frequent urination.

Keep in touch with your doctor. It is important to work with your doctor to monitor small fibroids and choose options that are reasonable to you. Fibroids can grow between appointments, so it is important to keep regular visits for ongoing management.

It is time that we begin to put women's health at the forefront of our agenda. Even if you are not a woman, you probably have a mother, grandmother, aunt, sister or daughter who may be affected by this disease. Therefore, your support is crucial to helping us pass this very important piece of legislation.

Women, we can no longer be silent about what ails us. If we don't speak out, our silence could be our downfall. Let us take responsibility for our health and make sure that we receive proper healthcare and know our options.

Jones is a member of the House Ways and Means Committee.

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